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Q&A: U.S. called 'principal target' of terrorists

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Frank H. Perez, deputy director of the Office for Combatting Terrorism, on the fight against terrorists.

As deputy director of the State Department's Office for Combatting Terrorism, Frank H. Perez plays a major role in the continuing fight against terrorism.

A retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force Reserve, Perez has served in a number of overseas assignments, most recently in Brussels, Belgium as political advisor to the U.S. Mission to NATO, and in Geneva as the State Department member of the Salt II delegation with the rank of minister.

Earlier he served as a member of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff and as an office director in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. He was interviewed by Washington Times staff writer Glenn Emery.

Q: It is often stated and generally believed in the West — that the Soviet Union is at least surreptitiously involved in acts of terrorism against the West, yet in 1980 the Soviet Union was the second most oft-attacked country after the United States, albeit a distant second. What accounts for the relatively high incidence of terrorism against the Soviet Union?

A: We don't know much about terrorism within the Soviet Union, but what we do know suggests that there isn't any problem domestically. The problem is external, once they get outside the Soviet Union.

One thing you have to remember is that most of these terrorist groups around the world are leftist-Marxist oriented and therefore, their principal enemy is the United States, not the Soviet Union. But in countries like Syria, where the Soviets have a large presence, they have been the target of terrorist attack by the Moslem brotherhood. Also, anti-Castro Cubans in the United States have attacked Soviet targets in this country. For example, they bombed the Soviet the Union Nations in New York.

Q: But one really can't compare the number of incidents against the West with those against the Soviet Union. Those against the West far outnumber those against the Russians.

A: That's right. The United States has historically been the principal target of international terrorism. We've been the target in about a third of all the international attacks, although this past year we were the target in almost 50 percent.

Q: Between 1968 and 1976, incidents of attempted assassinations averaged about 20 per year. During the Carter years, 1976 to 1980, such incidents increased dramatically — the 1980 rate being more than three times the 1976 rate. In 1981, the first year of the Reagan administration, the rate dropped to about the 1976 level. What accounts for this drop and what does it signify?

A: I think it's very hard to say what it means. As you indicated, in 1980 we had the highest number of assassination attempts, deaths and injuries. The rate has dropped somewhat. Some of it may be attributed to the fact that diplomatic missions around the world, not only the United States' but others, are taking greater precautions to protect their people. For example, the Turks have been subjected to many attacks by Armenian terrorists — they've lost close to 25 diplomats over the past few years.

The Israelis have always been subjected to terrorist attacks. The British have taken greater precautions because of the Irish terrorists.

Q: Is there anything about this administration that you feel has contributed to this decline?

A: It's very hard to say that the policies of this administration have contributed significantly to any reduction, but clearly this administration has taken the problem very seriously and has instituted a number of measures to deal with the problem.

Q: What are those measures?

A: Well, one of the things of greatest importance in dealing with international terrorism is intelligence. That is the key, and this administration had placed much greater emphasis on intelligence. We do get a lot of intelligence now that forewarns us of potential problems so that we can do something to thwart an attack.

In addition, the level of funding that we're providing for security is very important. The bureaucracy knows that the administration is very concerned with the problem and therefore gives it a high priority, therefore coordination and cooperation is much better than it's ever been.

Q: Is the present level of funding adequate for security purposes?

A: Well, you can never say you've got enough, but Congress has been very responsive to our needs in providing necessary funding for our security programs. I think in that area we're doing quite well.

Q: Besides intelligence, what else can be done to deal effectively with international terrorism?

A: We think international cooperation is absolutely essential, and we've made every effort to improve and enhance cooperation between like-minded countries. We think that cooperation between countries currently faced with this problem is good; bi-lateral cooperation in terms of exchanging intelligence, assisting each other. We don't feel that international cooperation on the political level is as good as it should be. We think there ought to be more multi-lateral cooperation in dealing with this problem.

For example, if we get information of a potential threat to another country we will provide them with that information, and they will do the same.

Q: What about reports that the CIA is either avoiding or obstructing an investigation into the attempted assassination of the pope?

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